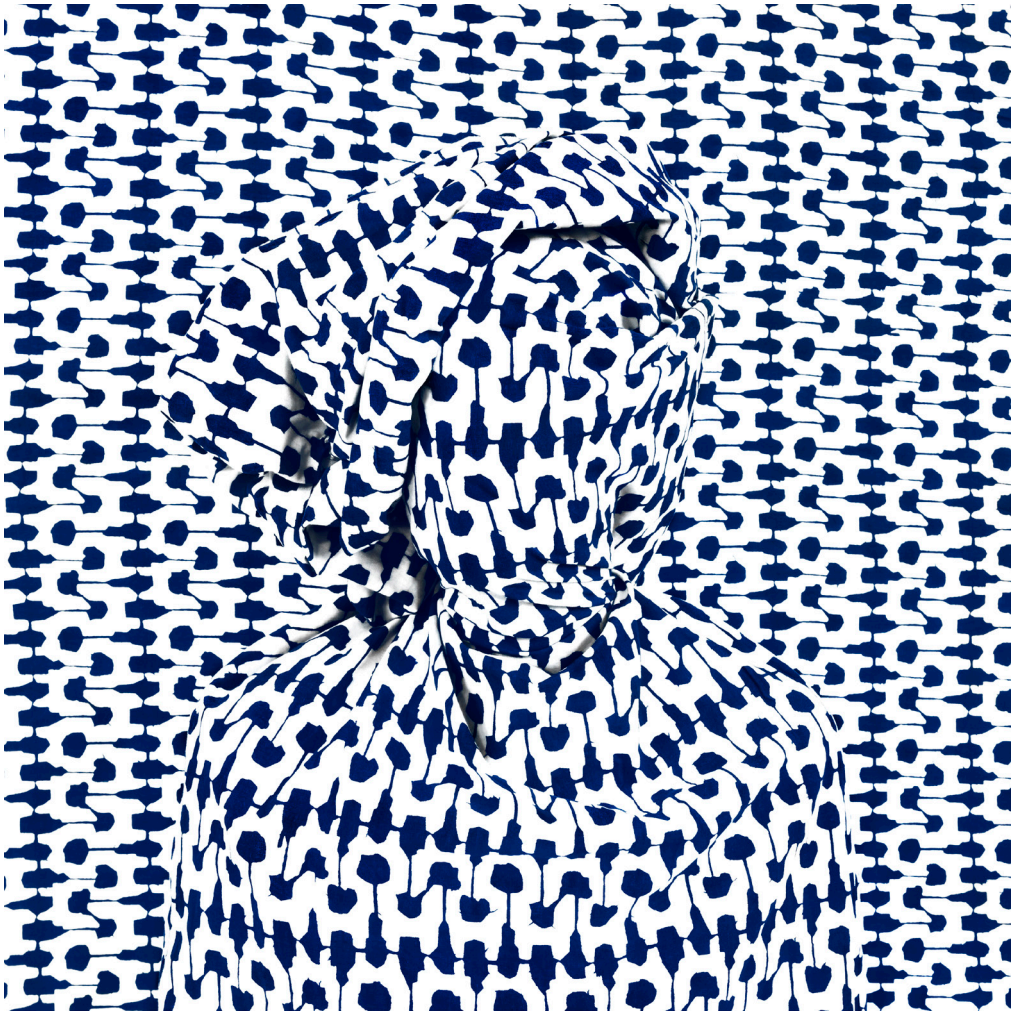

Allison Young
Shades of Blue – Alia Ali's INDIGO: Vision and Opacity

Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. [...] This—here is the weave, and it weaves no boundaries.

—Édouard Glissant[1]

In the Bambara language, spoken predominantly in Southwestern Mali, there are at least twelve words for shades of blue derived from indigo. This should come as no surprise: The region is central to what Baba Coulibaly and Mohomodou Houssouba have called West Africa's "indigo arc"—a stretch of savannah that is especially suited to the cultivation of the indigofera plant, from whose leaves is extracted the most prized, natural blue dye in existence.[2] The laborious process of preparing and fermenting vats of indigo dye can generate a wide range of luminous hues, that include the pale *bagafu*—a "blue of nothingness" produced by just one careful dip of white cotton into a bath of dye—and *lomassa fin,* or "profound, divine sky," a rich blue-black whose darkness is inconceivably deep, rivaled only by the cosmos itself.[3]

Is it that language rises to meet our experience, or the other way around? A number of recent studies have suggested—though not without debate—that a word for 'blue' might not have appeared in most language-systems until fairly recently in human history. The ancient Egyptians, who cultivated the only blue dye in the ancient world, are apparently the sole exception. Researchers are now asking to what degree language informs our capacity to perceive the world, or vice versa. In other words, is it possible that our species could not even *see* blue—despite the hovering, azure expanse above our eyes—until we crafted it ourselves?[4] This hypothesis is corroborated by the strange, and rare, allusions to color found in much ancient literature, as in Homer's now-famous description of the sea as 'wine-dark' rather than cerulean. Yet, in time, a world absent of blue would be followed by one in which its significance was unparalleled: *Indigofera* would become a cornerstone to centuries of global trade, as its pigment was called on to signify regality and visionary experience in societies stretching from West Africa to East Asia. Referred to conversely as both "blue gold" and the "devil's dye," it was among the most profitable cash crops of Atlantic colonialism.

Contemporary artist Alia Ali's *INDIGO* series is at once an homage to the complex historical significance of its titular pigment and a treatise on the nature of visual perception, itself. The daughter of migrant linguists, raised as a traveler between West Asia, Vietnam, the U.S., and Europe, Ali's practice has long centered issues of communication, belonging, and human connection—qualities enhanced through her engagement with the motif and material of cloth. As the artist has noted, cloth plays a role in nearly every human rite of passage—we are swaddled in fabric at birth and in death; our living spaces are draped in tapestries and tablecloths; our identities are conveyed, at times policed, through clothing. Fabric is also an archival medium, used to record history and to symbolize and mark the passage of time. Interweaving such considerations with the history of indigo in this specific body of work, the series

examines the liminal spaces between individuals and the worlds they occupy, between sensory and spiritual perception, and between color, pattern, and language as divergent communicative means.

Harvest:
cash crops, textile, and colonization

The compositional format for *INDIGO* remains consistent with that of Ali's prior and ongoing bodies of work: Textile-wrapped figures, whose faces, heads, and torsos are fully concealed by cloth, are photographed against fabric backdrops of identical or complementary patterns. Referred to by the artist as '—cludes', these figures symbolize the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, as well as border politics and histories of migration. They ask viewers, as Ali puts it, to "analyze their subjective perception" of others. Based on the experiences, biases, and personal identities that each of us brings to our encounters with the work, the '—cludes' might resonate in a number of ways—as either threatening or familiar, confined or empowered, dehumanized and captive, or liberated through their anonymity.

In the first few series to make use of the '—cludes', such as *FLUX* (2019-2021) and *BORDERLAND* (2017—), Ali utilizes complexly patterned and multi-colored textiles such as batiks, weaves, and ikats sourced from Yemen, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, India, Mexico, Indonesia, Japan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. These bodies of work explore points of connection and violence that are embedded in both the materials and histories of textile production.

In *FLUX,* for instance, Ali's models are wrapped in vibrant Ankara, or Dutch Wax, fabrics. The history of this cloth can be traced to the colonial appropriation of Javanese batiks in the mid-19th century, when the Dutch East India Company attempted to manufacture cheaper versions of wax-resist textiles that were produced, by hand, in its Southeast Asian colonies. Predictably, Dutch merchants failed to sell these factory-made imitations back to the communities from whom their patterns were stolen, but they were successfully marketed to West African colonies, where the fabrics were enthusiastically absorbed into local vernaculars. Today, Ankara fabrics are worn on the streets of Accra, Dakar, and Lagos—but also Brixton, Harlem, and New Orleans—where they often communicate new idioms and hidden meanings in addition to Afrocentric pride. As Ali explains, *FLUX* is meant to question "the very nature of how things get named, how they are translated, and how, eventually, they are reinterpreted."[5] Referring to the fabrics as "animated forms of camouflage," the artist encourages viewers to engage with her work, instead, on a purely optical level, as her sitters' bodies hover between hypervisibility and absence.

In today's art world, Dutch Wax prints are frequently associated with the work of Nigerian-British artist Yinka Shonibare MBE, who, since the mid-1990s, has playfully outfitted mannequin sculptures in Edwardian and Victorian costumes tailored in such textiles. These tableaux, with their multiple and contradictory associations, become a means of subverting notions of cultural authenticity. One of his most well-known installations, *Scramble for Africa* (2003), takes as its subject the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, a historical meeting at which officers representing the United States and thirteen European countries—who, in Shonibare's piece, are draped in Ankara fabric—claimed 90% of African territory for their own colonial expansion and mineral extraction. This catastrophic event was described in textile metaphor by Nigerian author Wole Soyinka, who wrote that "the colonial powers met to divvy up their interests into states, lumping various tribes together in some places, or slicing them apart in others like some demented tailor who paid no attention to the fabric, colour or pattern of the quilt he was patching together."[6]

Colonial histories of cloth, of course, have both global and local resonance across a number of port cities, waterways, and trade routes—including in the city of New Orleans, Ali's landing place in the United States following several years in Morocco. In fact, during the *exact* same months of the Berlin conference, New Orleans was host to the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial, which celebrated its centrality to the global trade in cotton. The expansion of the New Orleans Cotton Exchange in the 19th century was a major contributor to the city's affluence, as was its role in the international and domestic trades in human trafficking for chattel slavery. Rising global demand for cotton—fueled by the enhanced productivity of the cotton gin and other new technologies—was met through conscripted labor across Louisiana plantations. A poem published on the occasion, recently unearthed by art historian Anna Arabindan-Kesson, celebrated cotton as the "ruler of each hemisphere" and affirmed the South as "the center of a new American empire" fueled by cloth.[7]

Cotton and indigo—integral raw materials to the production of textiles—were so synonymous with the institution of slavery that by the late nineteenth century, abolitionists boycotted both crops in an effort to cripple Southern plantocracies and work towards emancipation. As production declined in the Americas, indigo farming shifted to South Asia, but brutal labor conditions were present in these regions, as well. Indeed, it was in India that the "indigo revolt" in 1859 took place—one of the first protest actions in which Mahatma Gandhi took part. As writer Catherine McKinley has put it, while indigo is a material that signifies luxury and refinement in so many parts of the world, it is also a "love song to the turbulence (if not the violence) and the beauty of *métissage,* the mixing of the races," as well as colonization, plantation agriculture, and borderlands.[8]

Shoot:
photography, opacity, and the body

The importance of textile to global histories of trade, colonization, and migration has guided Ali's choice to center this material as a primary artistic medium. Yet the unique pictorial format that has made her work instantly recognizable is attentive, as well, to the history of photography—a tool responsible for setting the visual terms of exclusion and inclusion in the modern era. Since its invention in the early 19th century, this technology has been marshaled towards the documentation and bureaucratization of human 'types' and categories. During the height of colonization, for instance, anthropologists made "anatomical observations on different races while traveling abroad," as historian Anne Maxwell explains, which were then codified through ethnographic portraits.[9] Given the medium's long-standing association with factual evidence, veracity, and truth, photography was an instrumental method of archiving, measuring, and controlling human difference within disciplines such as anthropology, criminology, psychiatry, and anatomical science.

Ali's deployment of this medium is both conscious of, and disobedient towards, these histories and implications—and ultimately subverts the hypervisibility of the subaltern body through methods of opacity and visual disorientation. Cognizant of the medium's colonial histories, as well as of its the problematic deployment in conflict zones today, Ali often reminds her audiences of the lexicon shared between photography and the military: to create a photographic image of a person, one must *shoot,* one must *capture,* one must *take.*

In *The Burden of Representation,* a seminal study on the standardization of visual representation in the 19th century, historian John Tagg explains that compositional consistency was key in affirming the evidentiary value of photography. In identification portraits and bureaucratic archives, "the format varies hardly at all," he writes. "There are bodies and spaces. The bodies—workers, vagrants, criminals, patients, the insane, the poor, the colonised races—are taken one by one: isolated in a shallow, contained space; turned full face and subjected to an unreturnable gaze; illuminated, focused, measured, numbered, and named; forced to yield to the minutest scrutiny of gestures of features."[10]

By imaging her figures thusly—positioned frontally within a shallow compositional space—Ali acknowledges the representational violence that Tagg and others have described. Yet, she also departs from this archetypal format: fabric swaddles her sitters' shoulders, face, and hair, denying the viewer access to the kinds of metrics that physiognomic scientists had sought to clarify. We cannot know the gender, age, racial or religious identity of the '—cludes.' Through this denial of access, then, at they are liberated from the patriarchal and Western gaze. They are made opaque, in the sense famously described by Martiniquan writer Édouard Glissant, who affirms the right of the historically oppressed to *not* be understood by others, to *not* be grasped, perceived, or known—when such knowledge becomes a form of conquest.

There are precedents, indeed, for resistance to photography's colonialist violence within the medium's *post*-colonial histories. West African studio photographers like Seydou Keïta, Malick Sidibé, Mamma Casset and Oumar Ka redefined the studio portrait in exactly such a context. In Keïta's studio, situated nearby Bamako's central train station in the 1950s and 60s, Malians were able to express new, hybrid identities before the camera. Elizabeth Bigham writes that Keïta's sitters "arrived dressed in cloths that provoked lushly cacophonous juxtapositions with Keïta's patterned backdrops," resulting in a "painterly play of pattern upon pattern and two- and three-dimensionality." [11] Likewise, contemporary artists such as Pushpamala N., Lalla Essaydi, and Shirin Neshat have staged powerful interventions that disrupt the logic of ethnographic portraits and *cartes de visite*. Such rich and nuanced forms of self-determination are present in Ali's usage of textiles that wrap figure, ground, and frame alike, pulling our eyes towards the surface and forcing recognition of the processes that underlie our own perception.

Disorient:
kineticism, abstraction, transcendance

Ali retains this format in *INDIGO,* yet departs from her prior work in ways that become immediately and, indeed, *viscerally* apparent to her audience. In place of the nuanced patterns and hand-woven ikats and Ankara that feature in other series, the textiles that wrap the '—cludes' in *INDIGO* are hard-edged and geometric, characterized by stark blue-and-white patterns of stripes, dots, and chevrons. In most works, Ali positions her figures against a backdrop that is similar, in make, but of a slightly different directional composition—diagonal stripes behind vertical stripes, chevrons behind circles, and so on. As such, works such as *Stellar I, Rain, Diagonal* and *Step* shimmer with intense, high contrasts and all-over repetition, generating a discordant effect in the viewer's visual field. To behold these works is to sit with a destabilizing sensation of unending optical vibration.

For Ali, color is an element that is capable of transcending language, of articulating a state of being, all its own. In letting the indigo hue speak for itself through pattern, she finds a place among artistic predecessors such as Yves Klein, who patented his own synthetic shade of ultramarine blue pigment. Named International Klein Blue (IKB), the hue was valued for its ability to convey pure immateriality, the abyss, the sea and the sky. Contemporary artist Lina Iris Viktor has cited Klein as an important influence, as well, stating that Majorelle blue (a shade that famously colors the *Jardin Majorelle a Marrakesh*) "transports you and calms you."[12] Algerian artist Rachid Koraïchi likewise describes blue as "supraterrestrial [...], the path of the infinite."[13]

While indigo, as a natural dye, is used in textiles from West Africa to East Asia, Ali does not reference any specific, handmade fabrics in the series, instead turning to a placeless, factory-made variety of modern cloth. This allows her to facilitate a much more direct, perceptual engagement between audience and image: The vibrating sensation that characterizes *INDIGO* is, in fact, reminiscent of that produced by the kinetic and Op artists of the mid-20th century. Op Art, so named for the optical illusions that it generates, is most often associated with artists like the British painter Bridget Riley, who sought to eschew the tradition of academic painting in favor of an embrace of modern design. Riley wanted to "break the rules," as artist Fiona Rae has written, about "what you are supposed to do in an abstract painting." Instead of imagining the spectator at a fixed distance from the work of art, she placed "the viewer in the middle of the experience."[14]

Likewise, many mid-20th century Latin American artists—especially in Argentina and Venezuela—applied such techniques to create visual reverberations as a powerful, liberatory gesture. Phillip Barcio writes, for instance, that the work of Argentine-French artist Julio le Parc "changes constantly according to circumstances and who is looking at it."[15] In contrast to the "authoritarian" associations of more static mediums, le Parc "saw movement as a way to democratize the experience of looking at art." The Venezuelan kineticist Carlos Cruz-Diez felt, too, that color could be unleashed as an "evolving situation, a reality which acts on the human being with the same intensity as cold, heat, and sound."[16] Such attestations mirror Ali's belief that color "can serve as a means to embrace that which cannot be legible through a lexicon, but can only articulate a state of being—the space existing between."[17] If her prior series ruminated on territorial borders and politics of exclusion, *INDIGO* shatters any indication of barriers—between reality and illusion, the rational and the ineffable, or physical and spiritual knowledge.

Ali's fascination with indigo stems not only from its mythical status as a textile dye used across the globe, but also from her own encounter with the color blue during a near-fatal experience she endured while travelling in the Himalayas. In recounting this, she describes a sensation of "vertical travel" *just* at the moment in which she submitted to her fate, as her visual field became suddenly awash with the color blue. The experience was revelatory, as if signalling the attainment of a new state of consciousness that is not legible through earthly or linguistic means. Indigo, a color so often associated with the higher chakras and 'third eye' abilities, in this sense begets transcendence. It also, perhaps, indicates an embrace of the abyss—Glissant's term for a kind of oblivion experienced in trauma.[18]

Love:
reorientation and resistance

Julia Bryan Wilson refers to textiles as "dense and multivalent signs of inscription" which are "available for a range of readings and conflicting interpretations."[19] Their usage as archives and historical records has only recently begun to be understood by Western academics who, too often, have relied on written text as the sole form of credible documentation. Indeed, as Bryan-Wilson has pointed out, following Roland Barthes, textile and text are etymologically linked by their Latin root, *texere*—to weave. The mythology of the Dogon peoples of present day Mali likewise attests that the ancestors were bestowed with the capacity for language and the ability to weave cloth within the same instant of divine creation. While Ali has valued this material for its ability to decenter the primacy of written text, she is also attentive to the importance of reclaiming language as a tool of cross-cultural understanding and resistance. As such, her recent series حـــب *(hub) // LOVE* (2021) pushes back against what she refers to as "the forced reorientation" of Arabic in a post 9/11 world, in which terms such as *madrassa* (school) or *taliban* (student) have been distorted in translation by fearful Western media. As Ali asserts in her statement for this series, a "pattern of misinformation and language abduction caused radical shifts in the language." Such transformations are like a glitch. As she explains, the phrase *"nahnu taliban fil madrassa, 'We are students in school' runs the danger of being understood as 'We are terrorists in a terrorist training camp.'"*[20]

Humanity might only be capable of perceiving and naming as many shades of blue as we, ourselves, can envision. Ali's work reminds us, too, that the language we use—the words we spin and our means of articulating our vision for the world—goes far towards manifesting and effecting the reality we want to create. She insists on the repetition of a word worth translating over and over: حـــب, love.

1
Éduoard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* translated by Betsy Wing, originally published in French by Gallimard, 1990 (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 190.

2
Baba Coulibaly and Mohomodou Houssouba, "Lifelong learning with indigo in Mali," *International Institute for Asian Studies,* The Newsletter, 87 Autumn 2020

3
See Keith Recker, "Blue Depths: African indigo master Aboubakar Fofana brings the blues to Sante Fe..."*THE Magazine (now Southwest Contemporary)* (July 2017): 19–21

4
There are a range of popular/scholarly sources on this contested claim; See, for instance, Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (Metropolitan Books, 2010), which is cited in Kevin Loria, "No one could see the colour blue until modern times," Business Insider, December 25, 2021, along with the Radiolab episode, "Colors: Why Isn't the Sky Blue?" produced by WNYC studios in 2012.

5
Alia Ali, statement for *FLOW* series [Accessed September 2021: http://alia-ali.com/statement-9]

6
Wole Soyinka, "The Bloodsoaked Quilt of Africa" Guardian Newspaper. May 17, 1994: 20. Credit for this quote, on my end, is due to Jessica Hemmings, "Textiles, Taxes & Translations: The Changing Meaning of Dutch Wax Resist," for *Toril Johannessen's Unlearning Optical Illusions,* ARoS Aarhus Art Gallery, Denmark, 2017.

7
Anna Arabindan-Kesson, "Material Histories and Speculative Conditions" in *Black Bodies: White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021)

8
From Catherine McKinley, *Indigo: In Search of the Color That Seduced the World* (London and New York: Bloomsburg, 2012), 205.

9
Anne Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect: Photography and Eugenics 1870–1940* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2008), 22

10
John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 64.

11
Elizabeth Bigham, "Issues of Authorship in the Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta," *African Arts,* Vol. 32, No. 1, Special Issue: Authorship in African Art, Part 2 (Spring 1999): 57

12
Lina Iris Viktor, "Reflections on Euphoria: Lina Iris Viktor," *Elephant,* May 10, 2021 [Accessed September 2021: https://elephant.art/reflections-on-euphoria-lina-iris-viktor-10052021/]

13
As cited in Alissa LaGamma, *The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design Without End*–preview text for an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 1, 2008 – March 22, 2009.

14
Fiona Rae, "Tate, Etc: Bridget Riley's Hesitate 1964," *Tate Collection,* June 23, 2013 [Accessed September 2021: https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-28-summer-2013/bridget-rileys-hesitate-1964]

15
Phillip Barcio, "Boundless Energy: The Art of Julio LeParc," *IdeelArt* Magazine, October 25, 2017.

16
See Estrellita Brodsky's interview with Carlos Cruz-Diez, *BOMB Magazine,* January 1, 2010.

17
Alia Ali, statement for *INDIGO* series [Accessed September 2021: http://alia-ali.com/statement-14]

18
In Glissant's *Poetics of Relation,* the 'abyss' often signifies the ineffable trauma of the sea, as experienced by those captive on slave ships—the memory of which has fueled ongoing forms of resistance and transformation across generations. To be clear, Ali's own experiences differ substantially from this context, but as a person who grew up amidst violent war in Yemen and in a condition of displacement in her early years, she is moved by Glissant's articulation of the ways in which it is possible to build creative forms of resistance after trauma.

19
Julia Bryan-Wilson, Fray: *Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4.

20
Alia Ali, statement for حـــب *(hub) // LOVE* Series [Accessed September 2021: http://alia-ali.com/statement-8]